Australian Bureau of Statistics

1370.0 - Measuring Australia's Progress, 2002

ARCHIVED ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 04/04/2002

MEDIA RELEASE

April 4, 2002 Embargoed 11:30am (AEST) 31/2002

Is life in Australia getting better?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) today released a major report that helps to answer the question: Is life in Australia getting better?

The report **Measuring Australia's Progress** (MAP) was launched by the Australian Statistician, Dennis Trewin, at the Towards Opportunity and Prosperity conference in Melbourne.

Mr Trewin said **Measuring Australia's Progress** drew on a range of ABS and other data to paint a balanced and factual picture so that discussion about Australia's progress could be more informed.

"Measuring a nation's progress is one of the most important tasks that a national statistical agency can take on," he said.

"For almost 100 years, the ABS has been measuring Australia's progress through the multitude of statistics we publish relating to Australia's economy, society and environment.

"However, for the most part, our statistical publications have tended to focus on each of these three broad areas in isolation.

"Recent and growing public interest in the interrelationships between economic, social and environmental aspects of life have been behind this new publication, which has been in development for about two years.

"Measuring Australia's Progress (MAP) considers some of the key aspects of progress side-by-side and discusses how they are linked with one another.

"This publication does not claim to measure every aspect of progress that is important. Nor does it consider all of the many different ways that parts of Australia and groups of Australians are progressing. But it does provide a national summary of many of the most important areas of progress, presenting them in a way which can be quickly understood."

Mr Trewin said MAP would evolve in the future by taking account of public feedback to the publication as well as changing views about progress and the availability of new data. The next issue is planned for late 2003.

MAP presents 15 headline indicators of Australian progress over the past ten years. A wide ranging consultation process, along with the help of numerous experts, helped the ABS choose the headline areas of progress and the best indicator to measure each area.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS FROM MEASURING AUSTRALIA'S PROGRESS

Health. During the past decade, Australians' health improved - children born in 1999 were expected to live three years longer than those born in 1990. Indigenous Australians, however, can still expect to live some 20 years less than other Australians.

Education and training. During the 1990s, the Australian population became more educated - between

1990 and 2000 the proportion of people aged 25-64 years with a vocational or higher education qualification rose from 46% to 50%.

Work. Since the last recession in the early 1990s the unemployment rate has gradually declined, and the unemployment rate in 2001 was 6.7%.

Biodiversity cannot be measured comprehensively, but some experts believe Australian biodiversity declined during the past decade, although protection for biodiversity improved. This is partly encapsulated in a rise in the numbers of threatened birds and mammals.

Land clearance. In 1999, about 470,000 hectares of native vegetation were cleared, an annual rate some 40% higher than in 1991. Land clearance is one influence thought to be reducing biodiversity, as well as contributing to land degradation.

Land degradation. In 2000, about 5.7 million hectares of land were affected by, or at high risk of developing, dryland salinity, a widespread form of land degradation.

Inland waters. Detailed national time series data are not available. But a variety of partial evidence points to a decline in the quality of some of Australia's waterways. In 2000, about a quarter of Australia's surface water management areas were classed as highly used or overused.

Air quality. Australia's air remains relatively clean by the standards of other developed nations. The available indicators, such as the incidence of fine particle pollution in several cities, suggest that Australian air quality has improved during the past decade, despite increased motor vehicle use.

Greenhouse gas emissions in Australia increased by 17% between 1990 and 1999. Australia has some of the highest per capita emissions in the world, in part because of our heavy reliance on fossil fuel burning and also because of the Australian economy's structure.

National wealth, as measured in Australia's national balance sheet, grew during the 1990s. Real wealth per person increased moderately (by almost 1% a year) between 1992 and 2001.

National income can be used to fund current consumption of goods and services. Or it can be saved to accumulate wealth. Real income per head grew strongly during the past decade (by 2.5% a year) - appreciably stronger growth than during the preceding twenty years.

Economic disadvantage and inequality. The real income of less well-off Australians (those in the second and third lowest deciles of the income distribution) increased between 1994-95 and 1997-98 by 5%. The incomes of better-off groups increased by a similar amount.

Housing. The commentary focuses on two social aspects of housing: housing affordability and houses with insufficient bedrooms. Although not a widespread problem, the proportion of houses with insufficient bedrooms declined during the 1990s. The proportion of households experiencing problems with the affordability of their housing remained much the same over the four years 1994-95 to 1997-98.

Social attachment refers to the nature and strength of relationships people have with one another. The publication presents a number of indicators showing how aspects of social attachment in Australia are changing, but none of these is given headline status. MAP does not make an assessment as to whether these changes signal progress or regress.

Crime. Through the 1990s, there was an increase in the prevalence of some of the more common personal and property crimes reported to the police. According to police statistics, for every 100,000 Australians in 2000 there were about 2,300 instances of unlawful entry and 740 victims of assault.

Commentary that accompanies the indicators discusses trends in progress together with differences within Australia and the factors influencing change. The aspects of national progress are linked with one another. Changes in one aspect will be associated with changes in many others - sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.
Overall progress should not be assessed by simply counting the numbers of areas getting better and subtracting those getting worse. Some aspects of progress (especially aspects such as national income and national wealth) are more easily encapsulated in a small number of indicators, than are some social and

environmental aspects of progress. And some readers of MAP will give greater importance to some aspects of progress than to others.

KEY ABS SOURCE PUBLICATIONS FOR MAP

Australian Social Trends - 4102.0
Presents statistical analysis and commentary on a wide range of current social issues. The 30 plus articles are organised into seven chapters, representing the following broad areas of interest: population; families; health; education and training; work; income and housing. Each chapter is supported by a set of summary tables including key social indicators which provide an overview of social change over the past decade, as well as how social conditions differ across Australian States and Territories. A set of international tables also compares Australia with 18 other nations.

The style of the report is clear, focussed and easy to read. Effective use is made of summary tables and graphics to highlight key information. The annual series, as it builds up over time, will provide an invaluable historical perspective of social change in Australia.

Measuring Wellbeing: Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics - 4160.0
A textbook concerning the conceptual organisation of social statistics in the ABS. After describing an overall system of social statistics, it addresses each major area of concern (ie, population, family and community, health, education and training, work, economic resources, housing, crime and justice, and culture and leisure). For each of these areas, the book discusses: issues involved in defining the scope and content of the area; the connection of the area to wellbeing; key social issues and population groups of interest; and frameworks and measurement tools used to organise the collection of statistics. The book also provides an overview of key data sources for each area

Measuring Australia's Economy - 1360.0
Provides national statistics, non-technical definitions and references to further reading for over 50 major economic indicators currently used by analysts and the media to measure the performance of the Australian economy. Indicators are provided for and grouped into summary measures of economic activity, international accounts, domestic consumption and investment, production, prices and incomes, labour force and demography, and financial markets. It also provides comparative international data for 11 key economic indicators and basic information about statistical concepts, sources and methods. A chapter on tax reform is also included.

Australian Economic Indicators - 1350.0
A monthly compendium of economic statistics, presenting comprehensive tables, graphs, commentaries, feature articles and technical notes. Primarily a reference document, the publication provides a broad basis for analysis and research on the Australian economy and includes statistics that can be applied to both macro-economic and sectoral analyses. The publication contains statistics under the following headings: national accounts, international accounts, consumption and investment, production, prices, labour force and demography, incomes and labour costs, financial markets, State comparisons and international comparisons. The March through to January issues generally present the statistics as time series for the last nine years of annual data, and for the last nine quarters or fifteen months of sub-annual data. The February issue contains longer time series.

Australia's Environment: Issues and Trends - 4613.0
Presents a broad selection of environmental statistics and information which illustrate topical environmental issues. Each year the subject matter covered will vary, as new environmental issues emerge or more current data sources become available. While ABS data forms a core component of the statistical information, data from other government agencies, international organisations, industry, and individual researchers is also included. Value is added to these widely sourced data sets by bringing them together and analysing their import for selected environmental issues.

Each year the publication will explore some of the relationships that exist between our use of the natural environment in Australia for socioeconomic benefit and the impacts that some of these activities have on our ecology and stocks of natural resources. Examples of specific issues covered in the second edition include: environmental accounts, eco-efficiency and indicators; land degradation; genetically modified organisms; uses and values of forests and woodlands; the environmental impacts of mining; and waste generation and minimisation. The publication aims to meet the information needs of a general readership.

Yearbook Australia - 1301.0
A comprehensive general reference work which includes basic statistics and different feature articles each year. Data are presented in tables and related explanatory text, some of which is illustrated by maps and graphs. The statistical coverage includes subjects such as population; labour, income and welfare; housing; health; education; crime and justice; culture and recreation; environment; agriculture; forestry and fishing; mining; energy; manufacturing; construction; service industries; tourism; transport; communications; science and technology; the financial system; government finance; prices; national and international accounts; as well as chapters on Australia's geography and climate, government, international relations and defence.

This page last updated 8 December 2006

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